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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SARAJEVO 000090

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR (DICARLO), EUR/SCE (FOOKS/STINCHCOMB),
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [KMDR](#) [BK](#)

SUBJECT: BOSNIA - DODIK'S ATTACKS ON PRESS AND NGOS RAISE
FEARS OF AUTOCRACY IN THE REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Judith B. Cefkin for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On January 10, Embassy officers and representatives of the International Community met with non-governmental organizations and independent media outlets in Banja Luka to discuss concerns over the deterioration of press freedom and freedom of speech in the Republika Srpska (RS). Principal Deputy High Representative (PDHR) Raffi Gregorian, who chaired the roundtable discussion, convened the meeting after frequent public allegations that, since the election 14 months ago, the government of RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik has systematically harassed its critics. International community participants expressed support for democracy in Bosnia, including a vibrant civil society and media, and promised to relay these concerns to RS officials. The meeting prompted an angry reaction from RS officials and RS-based media with close ties to Dodik. The RS-ruling party officials denied limits on press freedom and called for RS institutions and government officials "to stop all contacts" with Gregorian. Dodik characterized the meeting as an attack on the RS. The Office of the High Representative (OHR) has suggested that the February Peace Implementation Council (PIC) communiqué contain language reaffirming the PIC's support for democracy and human rights. End Summary.

Dodik's Method Behind the Madness

¶2. (SBU) Representatives of the international community, including OHR, the OSCE and representatives of the U.S., UK, German and French Embassies, met January 10 with leaders of RS-based independent media and NGOs to discuss increasingly frequent allegations that the RS government systematically impinges on freedom of speech and the press in the RS. PDHR Gregorian called for the meeting in response to repeated reports of intimidation and harassment of journalists and members of civil society. As a result of these public complaints, Federation-based media has increasingly speculated about the existence of an RS-Government list of individuals in media and civil society deemed suspect by Dodik and his government.

¶3. (SBU) Many of the individuals invited to the meeting were those reportedly on the purported Dodik "blacklist" including Head of the Narodni Front NGO Dragomir Babic, economic expert and former RS Minister Svetlana Cenic, Editor of Patriot Magazine Slobodan Vaskovic, Friedrich Ebert Foundation analyst Tanja Topic, and Chairman of the RS Employer's Confederation Damir Miljevic. Also in attendance were

freelance journalist Gordana Katana, Editor of Buka television program and an on-line journal Aleksandar Trifunovic, Transparency International representative Srdjan Blagovcanin and RS Helsinki Committee for Human Rights representative Vedrana Subotic.

¶ 14. (C) Participants alleged increasing frequency and severity of harassment by the RS Government and pro-Dodik RS media. They described a range of tactics, including open or veiled threats to physical safety to actual physical assaults. Some participants have been the subjects of actual or threatened lawsuits for defamation with the threat of huge fines that would bankrupt them. Others alleged phone tapping and other forms of surveillance. Other allegations included repeated visits by tax authorities, character assassination through the media, revocation of credit and loans and the denial of access to public hearings. Damir Miljevic noted that the RS Government allegedly withheld funding for the Banja Luka airport in 2007 because Miljevic was Chair of the airport's Supervisory Board.

¶ 15. (C) Patriot editor Vaskovic shared that in the past year, his son had been attacked and beaten three times by individuals he believed to be members of Dodik's personal security team. Vaskovic said that he went to the police to file a complaint, but they told him they would not make a report. He interpreted this as a clear signal to stop publishing material about alleged corruption in Dodik's government. Other participants threatened with physical violence were told to "be careful" when they contacted the police to report threats of violence. Vaskovic explained that he was also the victim of economic coercion by late RS President Milan Jelic who had pressured businesses to refrain from advertising in Patriot. As a result he recently published the last installment of Patriot and has been forced

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out of business. (Note: Patriot, formerly aligned with hardline elements of the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), has since shifted its editorial allegiance to the more moderate Cacic wing of the party. Ironically, it was one of the very few sources of independent media reporting in Dodik's RS. End Note.)

¶ 16. (C) When it became public that Miljevic would attend the January 10 meeting, he was contacted by Radio-Television Republika Srpska (RTRS) and asked to be a guest for an interview. Miljevic told us that at RTRS his entire interview was as substantive as what he described as "a discussion about the color of glass." He explained that this was the government's (poor) attempt to show that he had indeed not been blacklisted and that targeted individuals like himself were not being "shut-out" of RS media.

"Attacks on Press Freedom Worse Now than Under SDS"

¶ 17. (SBU) The independent media and NGO participants insisted that the oppressive atmosphere against critics of the current government is "worse now than under SDS." Topic explained that she has never felt less free to voice her own opinion or a "different" opinion than she does in the current RS climate. Others in the meeting echoed these sentiments, arguing that Dodik has complete control over all aspects of RS society and that things have gone "too far." They claim that Dodik takes every criticism personally and then uses the institutions he controls, such as law enforcement and the judiciary, and media loyal to him, to exact revenge.

¶ 18. (U) Following the meeting, OHR issued a press release stressing the international community's view that "an independent, vibrant civil society and media are cornerstones of a healthy democracy" and expressing our concern "over recent allegations of attempts to infringe upon press freedom and the rule of law in BiH."

Reaction from Banja Luka "Disproportionate"

¶ 9. (SBU) The meeting caused an immediate and defensive response from Dodik and those with close ties to Dodik's interests. Dodik characterized the meeting as an attack against the RS. On January 11, SNSD Executive Secretary Rajko Vasic called on all political and administrative institutions in the RS to "stop all contacts" with PDHR Gregorian and denied all allegations relating to limits on media freedom in the RS. Vasic further criticized the meeting saying that it included "a certain amorphous group, whose members do not have any collective or individual significance," and that the meeting was "a typical attempt to organize yet another attack against the RS." Vasic also used the opportunity to rail against OHR, asking them to "reign-in" the PDHR, questioning the institution's credibility and calling for OHR's closure. Nezavisne Novine owner and editor Zeljko Kopanja responded through his paper accusing the PDHR of being part of a "campaign against RS media."

¶ 10. (SBU) At the January 11 meeting of the PIC Steering Board Ambassadors (SBA), Russian Ambassador Konstantin Shuvalov criticized OHR for not having consulted with all SBA ambassadors prior to the roundtable, and specifically that the OHR press release implied the support of the entire PIC. OHR issued a press release on January 12 calling the RS reaction "disproportionate" and once again underscoring the international community's commitment to an independent, vibrant civil society and media. The Charge also placed a call to Kopanja to stress that the meeting was entirely consistent with the USG obligation to support basic democratic freedoms. She reminded Kopanja of his vested interest in the democratic principles of freedom of speech and the press, and said that past U.S. financial support to his paper had been made with the objective of supporting press freedom.

Comment

¶ 11. (C) Although we cannot verify the allegations made by participants during the meeting, their prevalence across a wide swath of RS civil society makes them appear credible on balance. The episodes described by RS-based press and NGOs

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raise serious concerns about Dodik's use of autocratic tactics to silence opposition and criticism of his administration. It is particularly troubling that Dodik, who retains an unassailable political mandate, has no reason to resort to such tactics to consolidate his position. Some observers speculate that he chooses to do so because of sensitivity to criticism and an underlying desire to control all aspects of political life in the RS. Ironically, Dodik's reaction to the OHR press statement after the meeting is consistent with the assertions of his critics. We will regularly remind Dodik and other RS officials of our continuing commitment to press freedom and support for civil society. The announced visit of the OSCE Special Representative for Media Access in the near future is also a positive development. We support the suggestion of several of our PIC colleagues present in Banja Luka that the PIC use its February communique to make similar points. End Comment.

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